Art and Imagination in English Language

Margaret Lee Zoreda
Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa

Abstract

This theoretical paper argues that the integration of arts and the stimulation of the imagination can help foster an intercultural formation within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Programs. After clarifying the varied definitions of "art," "Imagination," and "emotion," the perspectives of a wide range of scholars about the wide range of these terms are considered. Next, art and imagination are shown as aids toward creating an intercultural competence that completes and deepens linguistic competence in learning another language. Lastly, implications that such a curricular innovation in English programs would provoke are analyzed.

Introduction

For more than two decades the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa in Mexico City has developed and supported the creation of advanced courses in English, which are currently grouped under the title of "Selected Topics in Anglophone Cultures." In spite of being "extracurricular" (without carrying credits), these courses have attracted a variety of undergraduates, graduate students, professors, and administrative personnel—all with the desire to perfect or maintain their level of English and to learn more about cultural aspects of anglophone countries. The content of the courses has been wide-ranging: literature and film adaptations (science fiction stories and film adaptations; *Dupin and Holmes: The Birth of the Modern Detective*); thematic film courses (*Otherness in Anglophone Film*; *Intercultural Encounters in/with Anglophone Cinema*; *Classic U.S. Films*); a course based on one movie (*Breaking Away*), and an interdisciplinary one (stories, poems, recordings, music, film, and painting) based on the both canonic and popular, Edgar Allan Poe. Notwithstanding this diversity, a common element in all the courses is the incorporation of art as a fundamental content. Thus, the purpose of this paper of theoretical reflection is to argue in favor of the integration of the arts and the imagination in curricula of English as a Foreign Language (and, likewise, in those of English as a Second Language, ESL, contexts) with the goal of fostering intercultural education. First, since we are dealing with foundational curricular issues, it is necessary to understand the varied nuances of such key terms as "art," "imagination," and "emotion." Next, we will consider the perspectives that various scholars from a range of disciplines have expressed on these concepts and, subsequently, how these topics are interrelated. Afterwards, we will consider how art and imagination can help students form an intercultural competence that enriches and deepens a mere linguistic proficiency. Lastly, we will ponder the implications that such curricular changes would bring to English programs.

Defining "Art," "Imagination," and "Emotion"

Given that the present work concerns basic questions in philosophy of education, i.e., what ought to be the purposes of education and how should we educate our students, it is appropriate as a first step, to analyze and clarify the basic terms that are employed (Noddings 1995, pp. 4-6) according to their most common meanings as found in dictionaries.

First, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines "art" as "human workmanship; opposed to nature;" "the application of skill to subjects of taste, as poetry, music, dancing the drama, oratory, literary composition, and the like;" and "the skilful production of the beautiful in visible forms." It can be said to be "the quality, production, expression, or realm of what is beautiful or of more than ordinary significance" (*Random House Webster's College Dictionary* 1991). We may add here that the "beautiful" in its most extensive meaning includes "what stirs a heightened response of the senses and of the mind on its highest level" (*American Heritage Dictionary* 1985). Thus, we can observe that "art" forms part of human cultural experience, counterpoised to nature. It is concerned with what is perceived as beautiful, or with a deeper meaning than that which is common, and implies that beautiful encompasses the rational, emotional, and sensual. Art also describes the mastery of technique. Finally, art means the creation of the traditionally aesthetic objects, as in literature, music, theater, plastic arts, film, dance, architecture, etc. Nevertheless, we ought to recognize that both canonic art as well as popular art, and even daily life, have the possibility of providing us with fulfilling, culminating aesthetic moments, "in which the past reënforces the present and in which the future is a quickening of what is now" (Dewey, 1980, p.18).

Secondly, "imagination" has the following usual meanings. The *OED* defines it as "forming a mental concept of what is not actually present to the senses," "the mental consideration of actions or events not yet in existence;" "the power which the mind has of forming concepts beyond those derived from external objects;" and "the creative faculty of the mind in its highest aspect; the power of framing new and striking intellectual conceptions." We can see then that in a certain way imagination is associated with creativity and it can free us from the confines of time and space, helping to resolve problems in our everyday life.

Because the idea of beauty includes both the rational as well as the senses, and since art is usually linked to imagination, it is appropriate to review definitions of "emotion." It is "a moving out; any agitation or disturbance of mind, feeling, passion; a mental 'feeling' or 'affection' as distinguished from cognitive or volitional states of consciousness" *(OED*). The *American Heritage Dictionary* (1985) describes emotion as that "part of the consciousness that involves feeling or sensibility." So, the emotions are considered part of the mind, usually subjective, that have to do with feelings and sensibility. This affective state is an answer of the individual to his or her environment. Recurring to Dewey, we can conceive of emotions as unifying the different parts of experience, its "moving and cementing force" (Dewey, 1980, p.42).

These then are the usual meanings of the terms "art," "imagination," and "emotion." In the following section we will examine how various scholars in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences have extended, deepened, and interrelated these meanings to analyze their functions and activities within the human condition.

Contemporary Perspectives on the Meaning of Art and Imagination

Imagination can be conceived as one of the fundamental existential modes that humans have to relate themselves and their environment. The cognitive psychologist, Jerome

Bruner, proposes that human beings have two ways of relating to and structuring their lived experience: the paradigmatic mode serves to explain phenomena and the narrative enables us to understand our own life and that of others (1996, p.39). Through the second narrative mode, we create, through our imagination, stories that give meaning to our daily life. The naturalist philosopher, John Dewey, insists upon the interdependence of thought, imagination, and emotions in a holistic and organic vision of the human condition. According to him, thinking is an incarnate faculty, as much intellectual as it is emotional (Dewey, 1998, pp.332-333). Dewey further unites reflection with the power of imagination and maintains that "…deliberation is actually an imaginative rehearsal of various courses of conduct. We give way, *in our mind*, to some impulse; we try, *in our mind*, some plan" (Dewey, 1998, p.335).

Perhaps it is the philosopher, Maxine Greene who has pointed out most extensively the importance of the imagination, and therefore art, as integral elements in any educational policy. Greene explains the force that the imagination has to free us from the literalness of existence and the temporality of the present, and to be conscious of the multiple dimensions of things and events:

> Imagination is the capacity to posit alternative realities. It makes possible the creation of 'as-if' perspectives … without the release of imagination, human beings may be trapped in literalism, in blind factuality. ... It is imagination that discloses possibilities—personal and social as well as aesthetic. (Greene, 2001, p.65)

On the power of art, Greene notes that we can "connect the arts to discovering cultural diversity, to making community, to becoming wide-awake to the world ... [I]nformed encounters with works of art often lead to a startling defamiliarization of the ordinary" (Greene, 1995, p.4). Her beliefs are seconded by educational ethnographer Julie Kaomea, as she describes how art and literature intensify our perception of the everyday experience:

> Art and literature ... force us to slow down our perception, to linger, and to notice. Because our everyday perception is usually too automatic, art and literature employ a variety of defamiliarizing techniques to prolong our perception, attract and hold our attention, and make us look at a familiar object or text with an exceptionally high level of awareness .... (Kaomea, 2003, p.15)

Finally, philosophers, social scientists, and aestheticians agree that art and imagination create sympathy for others through *the ethic imagination*. As to the capacity of art to foster intercultural understanding, Dewey expresses great hope in its communicative faculty:

> ...[W]orks of art are the only media of complete and unhindered communication between man and man that can occur in a world full of gulfs and walls that limit community of experience.... [Through them] we are citizens of this vast world beyond ourselves.... (Dewey, 1980, pp.105; 195)

Following Dewey, we believe that all forms of art, both canonic and popular, have this gift for breaking down barriers that impede understanding between people, groups, or societies. In this same vein, the philosopher Martha Nussbaum is a fervent believer in the capacity of art (in its fusion with imagination and emotion) to sensitize us to the experiences

of others. She proposes an "education for compassion," at all levels of schooling, which would exercise "the muscles of the imagination, making people capable of inhabiting, for a time, the world of a different person, and seeing the meaning of events in that world from the outsider's viewpoint" (Nussbaum, 2001, pp.426; 431). For her, art in all its forms, is not only aesthetic but also political: "...what I want from art and literature is not erudition; it is empathy and the extension of concern"(2001, p.432).

From this same perspective, Greene, together with Richard Kearney (Kearney, 1998, pp.7; 232), proposes a social imagination to visualize, and therefore, reinvent more just societies (Greene, 1995, p.5), with the development of a moral imagination:

> In the kind of world in which imagination is alive, people have the capacity to look through one another's eyes, to take one another's perspective on the world .... For me, the moral concern begins with that kind of connectedness, with reciprocity, with the imagination needed to experience empathy ... enhanced and deepened by what some of us call the ethical imagination .... which can be released by encounters with the arts. (Greene, 2001, p.108)

Thus, this characteristic of the imagination enables us to perform what is the basic function of communication: we can "perceive and understand what differs from our categories and interests. We can evoke the others' beliefs and attitudes in our mind and compare them with our own" (Bredella, 2003, p.38).

In the following section we will observe how this "imagining" of the other can play a major role in the teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language.

Learning English through the Arts with the Imagination

In our globalized environment, (FL) objectives are not limited solely to the promotion of linguistic competency; it is also absolutely essential to include notions of intercultural competence. This need to understand the target culture(s) has been expressed in several national and international educational policy documents. Besides the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (2001) and the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century* (1996, UNESCO recently declared the importance of an intercultural formation:

> Education should raise awareness of the positive value of cultural [and linguistic] diversity ... the cultural component of language teaching and learning should be strengthened in order to gain a deeper understanding of other cultures; languages should not be simple linguistic exercises, but opportunities to reflect on other ways of life, other literatures, other customs. ("Principle III," *Education in a Multilingual World*, 2003, p.30)

Here "culture" refers to attitudes, behaviors, and products (both tangible and intangible) shared and revealed in any society; that is, both "culture" as well as "Culture." Claire Kramsch has further expanded that definition to include an *imagined* social space:

> [C]ulture can be defined as membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common imaginings .... [T]his diachronic view of culture focuses on the way in which a social group represents itself and others through its material productions over time—its technological achievements,

> its monuments, its works of art, its popular culture—that punctuate the development of its historical identity. (Kramsch in Scott & Huntington, 2002, pp.622-623)

However, in the creation of interculturality, it is not sufficient merely to know the target culture and its "imaginary" through the "inventory" method of "cultural capsules." For Bredella, in the same vein as Kramsch (1993) and Byram (1991), among the diverse traits of the intercultural person, we find "outsideness", or the ability to see the world from the viewpoint of others, and the voluntary distancing of oneself from one's own culture:

> Being intercultural means to reconstruct the others' frame of reference and see things through their eyes in order to overcome our ethnocentric tendency to impose our categories and values on their behavior.
> Being intercultural means to enhance our self-awareness as cultural beings. This makes us aware of the relativity of our beliefs and values and protects us from cultivating fundamentalist attitudes. (Bredella, 2003b, p.237)

Thus, Bredella underscores the role of imagination and "flexibility of mind" as predispositions for interculturality (Bredella, 2003a, p.38).

The same author considers experiences with art, especially (his view) literature and drama, to provide encounters of imaginative immersion and self-reflection that equally characterize rewarding acts of interculturality (Bredella 2003b: 230). So, we observe what we had noted earlier about the potential of art to involve the reader-spectator in a "foreign" world: we share the "otherness" of a text (or object), the point of view of the author/creator, his or her culture, etc. In foreign language education, art's power to submerge us imaginatively and completely into "otherness", and moreover, a truly *complex* otherness, can play a decisive role in forming the intercultural personality.

Lastly, in recent foreign language learning research, Scott and Huntington **(**2002**)** have created a model, which proposes the pertinence of literature as a catalyst in stimulating interculturality. These scholars, following Lange's interpretation of Bloom's learning taxonomies (Scott & Huntington, 2002, p.623), maintain that (inter)cultural understanding relies on two interdependent learning modes—the cognitive and the affective:

> [Cognitive learning] involves recalling, comprehending, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating knowledge. Affective learning ... involves receiving knowledge and attending to it, responding to knowledge with willingness and enjoyment, valuing difference, organizing values into systems and planning to respect difference, and showing a willingness to revise attitudes. (Lange in Scott & Huntington, 2002, p.623)

Scott and Huntington believe that intercultural competence is reached through the development of "affective awareness" and "cognitive flexibility" in the "co-construction of knowledge of the C2 [target culture] through a literary text" (2002, p.624). Therefore, the literary text offers an ideal space for intercultural encounters:

> [Literature is an] … expression of both personal and cultural phenomena. [It] … encodes cultural meaning(s). That is, literary texts are codified, interpretive lenses that construct meanings from cultural signs and references. Literature does not

> provide one-to-one definitions of cultural phenomena; instead, it presents nuanced interpretations of reality. (Scott & Huntington, 2002, p.624)

Taking into account the power of art to captivate through reason, imagination, and emotion, and then immerse the person in another "world," we propose an adaptation of Scott and Huntington's (2002) model which would not only include literature, but *all other artistic expressions* (both canonic and popular), including but not limited to: poetry, plastic arts, architecture, music, dance, drama, and film. These aesthetic manifestations, rich in cultural complexity, certainly offer the students the same degree of "nuanced interpretations of reality." In our version, the student is in the center, the target culture(s) of the Anglophone world are the "other," and diverse aesthetic texts serve as catalysts and bridges toward intercultural understanding. In active aesthetic experiences with these target culture(s), the student co-constructs knowledge of that culture and develops a sensitivity toward it through the encounter with the particular artistic manifestation as he or she exercises affective awareness and cognitive flexibility. The first faculty includes "awareness of feelings and attitudes, sensitivity to dimensions of emotion, and empathy for the Other; cognitive flexibility involves knowledge of multiple views, tolerance of ambiguity, and nonjudgmental evaluation of the Other" (Scott & Huntington, 2002, p.624). Obviously, to propitiate such abilities, teaching and learning would tend to be constructivist and collaborative—very distant from the traditional, simplistic "cultural capsules."

Implications for EFL/ESL Curricula

The arts must not be considered superfluous or "extracurricular" in university education—or, for that matter, at any level. To those who maintain that "There's no time for art in the curriculum," we would respond that one can only exclude it at the expense of an integrated education for our students. Moreover, it may be the case in many institutions that *only* in English language programs (and other foreign languages) can students enter into meaningful (cognitively and affectively) contact with the arts.

In this paper, for lack of space, we have only emphasized the role that art can have in the creation of intercultural competence. It should be pointed out that the development of the imagination is fundamental for any professional job. It is enough to claim that the future scientists, engineers, and professionals in the social sciences and humanities have to be able to imagine alternative "scenarios" in order to solve problems and postulate hypotheses in the creation of new knowledge, and, that as citizens they will have to imagine and create better and more just societies.

Nevertheless, and especially in English programs, it is truly necessary for the inclusion of the arts (and, thus, the exercising of the imagination) to counteract a certain tendency toward conflictive and prejudiced views of English-speaking cultures, both on the part of students as well as professors. Art can serve as an antidote for commercial textbooks where cultural capsules abound or to counteract "international English" (de-culturalized), where activities almost exclusively revolve around the supposedly daily life of the students. We must not forget that education intends to form the whole person in order to stimulate the possibilities of profound experiences instead of restricting them. Returning to our introduction, we can claim that encounters with the arts "broaden your horizon" because they help to awaken an intercultural sensibility of opening toward the other, whether another country, race, ethnic group, gender, or age. As Nussbaum has stated, in referring to American education: "Cutting the arts is a recipe for the production of pathological narcissism, of citizens who

have difficulty connecting to other human beings with a sense of the human significance of the issues at stake" (Nussbaum, 2001, p.426). Simultaneously, meaningful learning through the arts stimulates the imagination and opens our eyes to other possibilities outside our own particular space-time situation. This is of utmost importance if we believe, as does Greene, in transcendental ends for education as opposed to mere skill-acquisition:

> We are concerned with possibility, with opening windows on alternative realities, with moving through doorways into spaces some of us have never seen before. We are interested in releasing diverse persons from confinement to the actual, particularly confinement to the world of techniques and skill training, to fixed categories and measurable competencies. We are interested in breakthroughs and new beginnings, in the kind of wide-awakeness that allows for wonder and unease and questioning and the pursuit of what is not yet. (Greene, 2001, p.44)

I hope that this argument has been sufficiently persuasive in favor of including art and the imagination in the EFL/ESL curriculum, or for that matter, in all other curricula.

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