

Part 1: Using art at face value

In this first part of the series, we start by looking at art on a superficial level. In the example lesson plan, below, we will see how to make use of the aesthetics and content of a piece of work to generate language.

Lesson plan: Art adjectives poems

Level: Elementary upwards

Aims: To choose the best adjectives to describe an artist's work

Time: 45 minutes

Materials: Several pieces of artwork from the same artist (example: Marc Chagall)

Preparation

It doesn't matter what a teacher wants to achieve. It doesn't matter which subject he or she teaches. It's all the same: Students learn better when they are uplifted and one way to uplift is by aesthetically enhancing the learning environment. This may involve nothing more than decorating the classroom walls with images from an expired art calendar.

Classroom art galleries can be created using any of the following:

- art postcards
- art wall calendars (these provide 12 good-sized, good quality prints)
- art posters
- art images downloaded from the internet and printed off



Marc Chagall: *Birthday*, 1915 © Digital image (2010)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence

Procedure

1. When your students walk in the room, ask them if they notice anything different about the classroom. Find out if they like the artwork on display and perhaps ask them if they know anything about the artist.
2. Tell students that they are going to think of adjectives which could be used to describe the work on display. Give a few examples of your own. For example, if you decided to use work by Chagall, you could say that it is:
 - *haunting*
 - *colourful*
 - *surreal*

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If necessary, define the adjectives you have chosen and explain the reason or reasons behind your choices.

3. Ask students to walk around the 'gallery' (in pairs if they like) and consider the eight adjectives that they feel best describe the artist's work.

Note: This will work best if your students are given access to bilingual dictionaries, because some of the language may seem beyond the reach of your students' abilities (*eerie*, *captivating*, etc.). Students can be encouraged to think creatively in their own language first. As a teacher, your job can be to guide students with their choices and make helpful suggestions.

4. Once each student or student-pair has chosen eight adjectives, ask everyone to sit down. Pool all of the adjectives and write them on the board in alphabetical order. Do this by asking if anyone has any adjectives beginning with the letter *a*, then move onto *b*, then *c* and so on. Don't forget to add your own suggestions.
5. Once you have progressed through to the end of the alphabet, ask the students to each choose their 16 favourite adjectives from the board. You should do the same.
6. Ask everyone to tear up an A4 piece of paper into 16 pieces. They should then write each adjective onto a different scrap of paper.
7. Demonstrate how to make an adjective poem by shuffling the words around until you are happy with the outcome. Read out your poem, paying attention to the rhythm, and then invite students to do the same. For example:



Variations

1. Prior to the class, you may decide to compile a list of adjectives for your students to choose from. If you are using Chagall, the list might look something like this:

abstract	emotional	realistic
beautiful	erotic	religious
bright	feminine	sad
charming	happy	sensitive
childlike	haunting	sinister
colourful	intense	surreal
dark	lively	symbolic
disturbing	masculine	ugly
dreamy	melancholic	unforgettable
eerie	mysterious	warm

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2. Rather than write poems, students could use their adjectives to create word clouds for the classroom wall at www.wordle.net. For example:



3. Another way to create adjective poems is by pairing up adjectives and adding either the word *and* when pairs are complimentary, or the word *yet* when they are seen to be contradictory. For example:

Marc Chagall
happy and fantastical
abstract and busy
captivating and dark
haunting yet warm
melancholic and sad
sinister and eerie
disturbing and surreal
colourful and dreamy

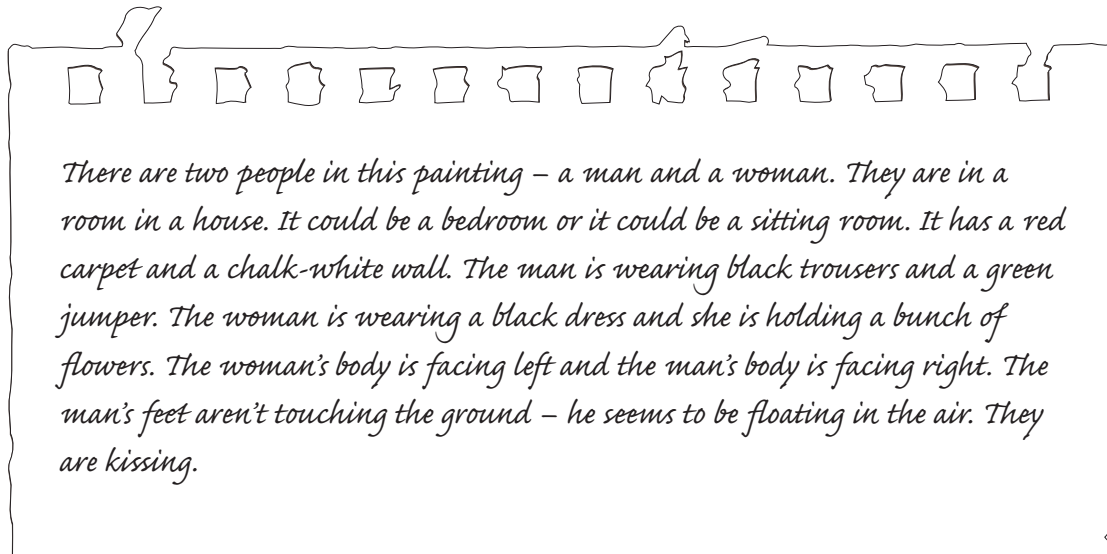
4. This activity does not have to be limited to adjectives. Students could be asked to write words or phrases to describe what they see in the paintings.

Other ideas for using art at face value

Picture dictation

In a picture dictation, the teacher describes an image in detail and students will draw what they hear. A picture dictation can be done in colour or in black and white. It will often work better if you prepare a descriptive text beforehand. For example:

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There are two people in this painting – a man and a woman. They are in a room in a house. It could be a bedroom or it could be a sitting room. It has a red carpet and a chalk-white wall. The man is wearing black trousers and a green jumper. The woman is wearing a black dress and she is holding a bunch of flowers. The woman's body is facing left and the man's body is facing right. The man's feet aren't touching the ground – he seems to be floating in the air. They are kissing.

I prefer to describe the picture in full before allowing students to start drawing. During the listening process, you should stop for any problematic words or structures which can be written on the board. Repeat the description two or three times if necessary before, or during, the drawing process.

This particular painting, Marc Chagall's *Birthday*, works well with this activity as it provides a logical problem that students will engage with: How can the couple be kissing if the woman's body is facing left and the man's body is facing right?

Finally, ask students to reconstruct your description beside their drawings as accurately as possible before showing them the picture.

What do you remember?

Choose a painting for your classroom wall. The one referred to above would work well for this activity. Make no reference to the painting unless your students decide to do so themselves.

After a week or two, remove the painting and ask students if they notice anything different about the classroom as they enter it. Put students into pairs or small groups and ask them to remember and write down as much as possible about it. Let pairs or groups merge and share ideas, then conduct feedback before taking the painting back out and returning it to the wall.

Mixed gallery: Comparisons (for advanced learners)

Turn your classroom into a gallery in which a number of different artists are represented. For example, you could choose:

- three pieces by **Edvard Munch**
- three pieces by **Paula Rego**
- three pieces by **Francis Bacon**

It is important that you put the paintings up on the walls randomly.

Let your students browse the gallery and ask them to decide how many artists are represented and then ask them to rearrange the paintings by positioning artist A's work together, artist B's work together, artist C's work together, and so on. This process will ensure that students mentally identify features of the art on display.

Once this has been done, ask students to consider how they were able to complete the task. Ask each student to write three paragraphs:

- **Paragraph 1** should compare the work of artist A with the work of artist B.
- **Paragraph 2** should compare the work of artist B with the work of artist C.
- **Paragraph 3** should compare the work of artist A with the work of artist C.

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As an alternative task, ask students to consider the work of each artist on its own merit. Ask them to choose one artist and write a paragraph which draws attention to:

- colour
- shape and composition
- subject matter
- symbolism
- mood

Students can then read out their paragraphs while the rest of the class decides which artist is being described in each case.

In the next article, we will see how to make use of students' personal tastes in art as a resource for the language classroom.



Marc Chagall: Birthday, 1915 © Digital image (2010) The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence