

Art & Inquiry in the Language Classroom

Goal and type of lesson: inquiry-based lesson in which students examine and discuss an artwork, which provides the topic for a piece of writing or an online blog post

Level: Intermediate/advanced university prep, or university first-year class in ESL English Composition/Writing.

Assumptions:

1. Students use all four primary language skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing) in exploring the subject.
2. Students are not necessarily familiar with Western art movements.

Materials:

Screen or whiteboard on which is presented an image of *I and the Village*, by Marc Chagall (oil on canvas, 1911, MoMA, NYC).



Background:

Chagall completed this work in Paris in 1911, when he was aged 24. The painter depicts the easy interdependence of village people, a contrast with the industrialization of the early twentieth century which he saw around him as an adult in Paris

Second language students will relate:

Firstly, to themes of intercultural communication, migration and adaptation to a foreign society:

Secondly, to the ways in which the ideas, values, and memories that we carry with us from childhood and youth shape our experiences, and our interpretations of the world.

The lesson:

The lesson begins with a presentation of the artwork. There is no “warmup” activity as such. Instead, students have **several minutes** to explore the artwork visually, to discuss it in pairs or small groups, and to make notes about questions.

Then, three inquiry-based questions elicit students’ responses to and impressions of the artwork.

1. What do you see in the painting; who are the people and what are the objects?
2. How would you describe the mood and the scene?
3. This is an interpretation of the artist’s native village. How do you think the artist remembered the village of his childhood? What were his feelings about it?

During and following this inquiry process the instructor introduces three pieces of background and contextual information relevant to the artwork, explaining new vocabulary.

1. Marc Chagall was born in 1887 in a village in eastern Europe (now in the country of Belarus). The laws and customs at the time made it difficult for him to travel to the capital city to study art. By the time he was 25, he had travelled in western Europe, mainly between Paris and Berlin.
2. The village where Chagall spent his childhood became the inspiration of this work, titled *I and the Village*, completed in Paris in 1911 when the artist was 24.
3. Although Chagall became one of the major artists of the twentieth century, he remained, according to one art historian, “most emphatically [an artist], whose work was one long dreamy reverie of life in his native village”

Lesson theme

The theme of the lesson is society, culture, migration and exile. The lesson has activities (and follow-up assignments) based on an integrated-skills approach to language.

- new vocabulary needed for a discussion of the artwork is introduced and reviewed
- students then practice their language skills in a communicative way by listening, discussing (speaking) in small groups and individually, following a written instruction (reading), and finally writing as homework a short essay or blog post about their home town or country.

Class discussion

Students practice and develop their language skills in an integrated way while exploring the artwork, its context and background.

One discussion question considers that Chagall lived at a time before the Internet, a time when migrants and exiles - unlike students today - were unable to form virtual communities with their families and friends in other countries. How does the Internet shape the way we communicate with our families and friends, and in what ways does this differ from the past? Following discussion, the question becomes the topic for a piece of written homework

Reference:

Marc Chagall, *I and the Village*. Museum of Modern Art, New York City, NY.
http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=78984

References, links, further reading

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- ▶ Dallacqua, Ashley, Sara Kersten, & Mindi Rhoades. 2015. Using Shaun Tan's Work to Foster Multiliteracies in 21st-Century Classrooms. *The Reading Teacher* 69(2), 207-217
- ▶ Dell'Angelo, Tabitha. 2014. Literacy through Photography for English Language Learners. *Edutopia*. <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/literacy-through-photography-for-ells-tabitha-dellangelo>
- ▶ Getty Museum, Using Art for Teaching English. http://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/classroom_resources/curricula/esl3/index.html
- ▶ MoMA Learning. Museum of Modern Art, New York City. http://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/tools_tips
- ▶ The Museum of Modern Art. 2004. *MoMA Highlights*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art.
- ▶ Roberts, Jennifer. 2013. The Power of Patience. *Harvard Magazine* (Nov-Dec). <http://harvardmagazine.com/2013/11/the-power-of-patience>
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