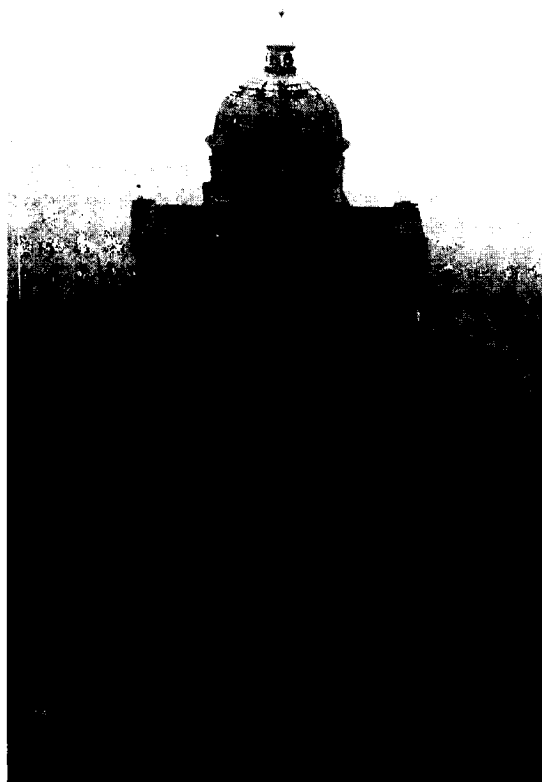


Teaching in Another Culture: Preparing Art Educators for Teaching English Language Learners¹

BY CAROLE HENRY



A view from within the Etruscan walls of Cortona, Italy.

Within teacher preparation programs in the United States, especially in those states where immigration has only recently begun to occur, preservice teachers are often not prepared to work with students who do not yet speak English (Giambo & Szecsi, 2005/06). This article presents the results of a pilot project designed to investigate the feasibility of offering an art education course as a component of a university studies abroad program and then apply those results to preparing future art teachers to work more effectively with English Language Learners (ELLs)² within U.S. schools. Three art education students participated in the pilot project in Cortona, Italy teaching art to children who did not speak English. Through an analysis of the data, it was determined that this experience gave the students greater confidence in their own teaching overall and served as a foundational experience that could help them be more successful in working with English as a Second Language (ESL) students in the future.³

Today's educational climate is increasingly diverse. By 2015, it is predicted that 15 million students, or 25% of the total K-12 population in the United States will speak a language other than English on their first day of school (Garcia, 1995). While a number of states, such as those that border Mexico, have experienced immigration for some time, the populations of other states are becoming more diverse with immigration from many parts of the world including Asia, the Middle East, Central America, the African continent, and Eastern Europe. Some of these population changes are quite dramatic. For example, within Georgia, the Hispanic population has increased over 300% since 1990 (State of Georgia Office of Planning and Budget Census Data Program, n.d.). In 2003-04, over 5 million children in the United States were



The use of gestures was an important aspect of communication.

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identified as limited in English proficiency with ELLs comprising approximately 10% of the pre-K-12 population, a 44% increase from a decade earlier (Giambo & Szecsi, 2005/06). Many of these children receive only limited English as a Second Language (ESL) classes (Fillmore, 2000). Stress and anxiety are common as the children, having recently left their friends and their homes, enter classrooms where they lack proficiency in the dominant language. Additionally, many of the children are also expected to speak English in school and their native language at home (Miller & Endo, 2004). Adding to those issues are the increasing calls for immigration reform in the US, political messages that can also affect how immigrant children are perceived by others. Better understanding of the emotional, as well as the cognitive, needs of ESL students is crucial to their educational success in a new country.

Art has long been seen as a visual language. Dewey (1934) wrote of the power of art objects to convey "what cannot be said in another language" (p. 106). Arnheim (1954), Feldman (1982), and Eisner (2002),

among others, wrote about the way in which the visual arts function as language. Eisner (2002) wrote that the arts have the power to "communicate ideas ... that elude discursive description" (p. 204). Georgia O'Keeffe, in explanation of her work as an artist wrote, "I found that I could say things with color and shapes that I had no words for" (in Hurwitz & Day, 2001, p. 123).

Eubanks (2002) explained that because of the ability of art to function as a language, "The art classroom may be the first place that immigrant students feel comfortable and capable in school" (p. 44). Eubanks added that art teachers often must quickly adapt curricula and pedagogy on an individual basis. Understanding the needs of ESL students and developing teaching strategies that are successful should be crucial components of art teacher preparation programs today.

Professional organizations recognize this challenge, as in the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education Standards (NCATE), which require that all "candidates ... acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary

to help all students learn" in preparation for "working with diverse ... students in P-12 schools" (NCATE, 2006). The National Art Education Association in its *Standards for Art Teacher Preparation* (Henry, 1999) states that preservice art teachers must be able to "develop a repertoire of teaching strategies appropriate to the needs of all students" (p. 11). Experiences during teacher preparation with students who speak other languages can better prepare our students for the diversity within the contemporary classroom.

Description of the Setting

Cortona is a small Etruscan hillside town in Tuscany and the site of the University of Georgia Studies Abroad Program. The program has become year-round from its inception as a summer program over 37 years ago and typically offers studio art, art history, and landscape architecture, among other offerings. In the Spring of 2001, a pilot project was conducted to investigate the feasibility of offering art education. The small local elementary school, the Scuola Elementare di Cortona, allowed unique opportunities for art education students to work directly with Italian children and teachers. Questions that needed to be addressed before this course could be approved included: How problematic would language be? Could students communicate effectively through other means? How would the Italian students react to American students? What lessons could be learned that might apply to teaching non-English speaking students in the US? Funding was secured⁴ and plans made to travel to Cortona during Spring Break 2001 and pilot this project in the Italian school.

Description of the Participants

Three art education students who had studied previously for a semester in the Cortona Program were selected for this project. Their familiarity with Cortona and the Italian culture, their commitment to art education, and their maturity as students were the primary reasons for their selection. One was a graduate student and the other two were undergraduates. Their teaching experiences varied; Erin had completed student teaching, Katie was student teaching at the time of the project, and Carrie would student teach the following fall. Prior to the trip to Cortona, they enrolled in a directed study course for that semester. They spent the first part of the semester preparing for

the experience, learning more about Italian language and culture, and being introduced to the fundamentals of qualitative research. They also developed lessons based on the Italian curriculum and reflecting national and state standards in the US. Because English is introduced in the third grade in Cortona, the lessons were planned for grades three, four and five.⁵

Description of the Italian Elementary School

The Scuola Elementare di Cortona is a small, yellow cinderblock two-story building with a clay tile roof. A gated courtyard in front of the school provides a recess area for the children. It is a partial-day school for first through third grade; those students leave at 1:00 p.m. to go home for the day. Fourth and fifth graders attend additional afternoon classes 2 days a week. Family is important in Italian culture, and the school's hours reflect that value. Classes meet Monday through Saturday. At 1:00 p.m., parents gather at the front of the school to take their children home.

Walking through the double glass doors into the lobby, the scene is reminiscent of any small school. Children's artwork and announcements line the walls. While several of the teachers know some English, Italian is the only language spoken in the school. Children are introduced to basic English vocabulary in the third grade. There are several children in the school with English or American parents, and these children speak both Italian and English. There is no art teacher, but classroom teachers incorporate art experiences within their instruction, much as is the case with many elementary schools in the US.

Methodology

The scheduling of the class sessions allowed time for the art education students to reflect and adapt future lessons. One class met on Tuesday, one on Thursday, and one on Saturday morning. I observed all three class sessions and made photographs to document the interaction between the students and the Italian children. The art education students served as participant-observers. The primary data source was a series of debriefing reflective sessions held after each class session. These discussions, in which the students discussed their reactions to the language barrier, the success of their



Post-teaching discussions were tape-recorded for analysis.

lessons, and ideas for the following experiences, were tape recorded and later transcribed. The transcriptions were analyzed by each art education student to discover common themes. The students were also asked to write a final reflection after they returned to the US in which they addressed the following questions: (1) What did the experience teach you about yourself as a teacher? (2) How did this experience prepare you for teaching future students who may not speak English? and (3) What suggestions do you have for art education students who enroll in the proposed class in the Cortona Program? This article presents a composite of those findings and makes recommendations for working with ELLs in the US.

One important realization was that lessons involving higher-level thinking skills could be successfully taught despite the language barrier.



Key parts of the instructions were written on the board in Italian.

Similarities to Previous Experience

The students were nervous and excited on the day they first visited the school and met with the director. Once they entered the school, they immediately saw similarities to their own experiences. Katie said, "I was very nervous. I ... didn't know what to expect ... The school looked a lot like a typical American elementary school. So it was calming when we walked in because we saw the ... students, and there was artwork on the walls ... It was comforting" (personal communication, March 6, 2001). The art lessons were held in a classroom used for teaching English. According to one student, "It looked so much like a classroom in America ... wooden tables and chairs and big windows ... and it had the ... words ... you could tell that they were studying English" (personal communication, March 6, 2001). In her analysis of the transcriptions, Katie added "Because I was working on my student teaching during this study, I became very intrigued with the comparison of schools in America and in Italy ... some of the similarities I discovered were: (1) the concern the teachers had for their students, (2) the ... nature of the students, and (3) the excitement the children showed for art" (personal communication, June 26, 2001).

Communication Issues

Each day, the students wrote the key concepts of the lesson on the board in Italian. They also had numerous visual examples that they had made in preparation for the experience. Although they had tried to learn as much Italian as possible through tapes and conversational classes, they often had to find other means to communicate. Erin had a pocket translator which the Italian children enjoyed using. The children were very interested in the students and often tried to help them communicate. For example, one child had difficulty making himself understood until "he turned his paper over and drew" what he was trying to say. They also enjoyed teaching the art education students Italian words related to the lesson. Carrie said, "Not only were we able to teach them art, but they were able to teach us, and help us with our Italian." The art education students used whatever means they could to communicate including drawing and acting out meanings. Katie explained:

Erin, Carrie, and I went through a great deal of work to prepare ourselves for the language difficulties that we would face in our lessons. It was a struggle that required us to concentrate on the main goals we had for our students, and what would be the easiest way to

communicate these goals or objectives. This process not only helps teaching in a different culture, but it also improves the overall focus of how to relay information in the simplest way possible to all students. (personal communication, June 29, 2001)

Benefit of Teaching in Another Culture

The art education students discussed how the experience of teaching in the Italian school gave them greater insight into their teaching ability and made them more excited about teaching. One important realization was that lessons involving higher-level thinking skills could be successfully taught despite the language barrier. Erin's lesson, using strategies of juxtaposition familiar to those who study creative thinking,⁶ dealt with combining a favorite animal with a favorite place. Children first identified a favorite place and, without any connection being implied, then identified their favorite animal. They were then asked to draw the favorite animal *in* the favorite place. Erin's example showed a zebra in an art supply store. She related how the children responded positively saying she "knew right away that they understood the lesson and that they had the capability to go with the idea." Their ideas were imaginative; for

example, one student drew her cat in the shower. Carrie said, "They were excited when we asked them questions where they had to use their imagination."

Writing her final reflection after she completed student teaching, Katie related the experience to teaching ESL students. She explained, "Attempting to teach students in a different language is becoming a more common issue in American schools. My student teaching experience was proof of this... Many Hispanic students who spoke no English were in my classes, and it was a challenge to communicate with them. Teaching Italian children helped me to feel comfortable in an American classroom with many children who knew no English." She also added that she believed "that anyone who travels to new countries and encounters different cultures receives [develops] an improved outlook on the world" and that this experience "opened [her] eyes to a different way of life." (personal communication, June 29, 2001).

How problematic would language be? Could students communicate effectively through other means?

The observations of the class sessions and the analysis of the data demonstrated that the language difference, although at first disconcerting, was not a significant barrier to instruction. Having key parts of the lesson translated into Italian was important, but the students indicated that there were other equally successful means of communication, such as using visual examples, drawing the meaning of words, asking the children how to say specific words, and using gestures and acting to communicate more complex ideas. Additionally, the visual nature of art contributed to successful communication. However, all of the students agreed that learning as much as possible in the child's language was essential not only in clarifying communication but in developing a sense of rapport as well.

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How would the Italian students react to American students?

Another concern had centered on how the children would react to the American students. As soon as the art education students entered the school, this concern began to disappear. The children responded positively to the students and actually helped them as they sought means to communicate most effectively. They translated words for the students; they drew out ideas they wanted to communicate; and they were willing to help other children who did not understand a particular concept. Children communicated their interest in the experience through their interaction with the art education students and their degree of engagement throughout the lesson.

What lessons could be learned that could be applied to teaching ELLs in their classrooms of the future? What recommendations would they make to others?

The art education students were asked to reflect on their experiences and develop suggestions for working with students for whom English is a new language (see Table 1). Their suggestions included providing numerous visual examples to illustrate concepts, learning a few basic words in the child's language, asking other children who understand to help communicate, and using gestures and "acting" to help facilitate instruction. Some of their suggestions were more practical, such as keeping language dictionaries in the classroom, but others more philosophical. For example, Carrie explained that she "learned that it is possible to communicate depth of content despite language barriers..." and that "what was so unique about the project was that the nature of the children and of visual art transcended verbal language." Erin stressed how important it was "to become familiar with the functions, styles, and meanings of art in their [the children's] culture" in order to make connections to non-English speaking

students. These realizations echo Hallahan and Kauffman (2006) who, in addressing multicultural and bilingual issues, explained that all too often, "education . . . is not appropriately challenging" (p. 98). They also added that "part of the better training of teachers is helping them to be more knowledgeable and responsive to both their own and their students' cultures" (p. 90).

Final Thoughts

Students were asked to discuss what the experience taught them about themselves as teachers and to identify how they thought it helped prepare them for teaching ESL students in the future. Their responses indicated that the experience of teaching in another culture gave them more confidence

Table 1. Suggestions for Working with English Language Learners¹

- **Learn basic words such as simple greetings, numbers, colors, plus the phrase "How do you say ... ?" in the student's first language.**
- **Remember that drawing is a very effective way to communicate.**
- **Keep specific language dictionaries on hand.**
- **Provide numerous visual examples to illustrate concepts you want to teach.**
- **Write key points of the lesson in the students' language as well as in English on the chalkboard; ask ESL teachers or other ESL students for assistance.**
- **Have students who understand the assignment help explain it to others.**
- **Become familiar with the art of the students' culture (the function, styles, meaning, etc.).**
- **Encourage students to communicate through actions and gestures. Both you and your students can enjoy acting out phrases, etc.**
- **Teach for higher level thinking skills. ESL students will live up to your expectations.**

in working with ESL students. They experienced firsthand the anxiety that results from entering a school where they were not proficient in the dominant language and how important it was to be welcomed by that community (Miller & Endo, 2004). They learned that there were nonverbal ways to communicate effectively and that efforts to make the child feel valued through references to the child's culture or the usage of basic words in the child's language were crucial to developing a sense of rapport. They now knew, as Carrie stated, that it was "possible to communicate depth of content despite language barriers," a belief that will certainly help them as they continue their development as art teachers.

As a result of this pilot project, semester-long art education courses are now offered each spring in Cortona.⁸ Continuing the relationship established with the local elementary school, teams of art education students work together to provide weekly art instruction serving every grade level. They follow the model established through the pilot project and work with the same class each week thereby developing a sense of familiarity and gaining a deeper understanding of the children and their individual characteristics. Some of these students are now art teachers in the US, and research into the effects of this experience on their ability to successfully work with ESL students is in process.⁹

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ENDNOTES

- ¹Initial research was conducted with the assistance of Katie Arnold, Carrie Brooks, and Erin Hancock, all University of Georgia students in 2001.
- ²The abbreviations ELLs (English Language Learners) and ESL (English as a Second Language) are used throughout this paper with ESL used as an adjective (to describe students, classes, etc.) and ELLs as a noun.
- ³For those interested in creating similar foundational experiences here in the US, possibilities exist for preservice work with immigrant populations in many communities throughout the country.
- ⁴This research project was funded by a 2001 University of Georgia Research Foundation Grant and followed a 5-day visit the prior year to visit the school, meet the director, and learn about the Italian curriculum. The grant funding covered travel costs for the author and the three students, the cost of art materials for the school, and film and audiotapes for documentation. It also covered hiring an Italian graduate student to translate the Italian curriculum into English and the lessons the students generated into Italian. Once the lessons were planned and translated, they were submitted to the director of the school for her approval.
- ⁵The third grade lesson used an Italian nursery rhyme as the subject for imagery; the fourth grade lesson focused on self-portraits; and the fifth grade lesson explored juxtaposition (see note below) as an exercise in creative thinking.
- ⁶E. Paul Torrance and H. Tammy Saftner in *The Incubation Model of Teaching* (1990) recommended teaching strategies such as the "juxtaposition of apparently unrelated elements" (p. 25) and the "familiar made strange or strange made familiar" (p. 20) to encourage the incubation, or synthesis of solution, stage of the creative process. Both strategies were present in the implementation of this lesson.

In-between...

Translation is obviously an in-between space wrought with communicative possibilities, and yet, the need for some form of mediation seems to be a constant one. See how many differing interpretations result from exploring with your students the text of an idea through several language and symbolic translations.



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⁷These suggestions were developed by Erin Hancock, Carrie Brooks, and Katie Arnold and first presented at the 2002 NAEA Convention. The list is not intended to be finite and should be viewed as expandable within individual classrooms based on student needs.

⁸See www.art.uga.edu/cortona for further information.

⁹An initial report on this ongoing research was presented by the author and Dr. Tracie Costantino at the 4th International Conference on Imagination and Education in Vancouver, BC (*Visual Art as Cultural Mediator*, 2006).

NOTE

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