From Foreign to Familiar: Approaching the Arts As the New Potential Second Language in Socially Aware Education

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Abstract
The paper examines the potential of arts as a second or additional language. It proposes that this approach offers students a unique opportunity to develop cognitive and language skills, critical thinking abilities, cultural awareness, and a sense of social justice. Art literacy involves several aspects, including appreciating the arts, being inspired by them, reflecting, and expressing oneself through them. Similarly, learning a second language requires familiarising oneself with its sounds and forms, interacting and collaborating with experienced target language users, and reflecting and expressing oneself through the language. Integrating arts as an additional language into educational practices can create inclusive, dynamic, and critical learning environments that provide equitable access to all students, fostering creativity, empathy, and a deeper understanding of the world around them. Studies have shown that motivation and individuals' willingness to learn a language can significantly impact their proficiency, and the arts have a unique advantage in this regard. They can initiate communication through non-linguistic means without the limitations of grammar and language rules. This approach is particularly relevant for e-generation students who prefer to express their emotions and ideas through diverse means. Drawing from the CARE/SS EU-funded Erasmus + project, this paper provides documentation of the power of art to act as an additional language that scaffolds students' learning across the curriculum. It also provides a platform for students to engage with critical issues, develop a deeper understanding of societal challenges, and cultivate a sense of social responsibility.

Keywords: Art Education, Second Language, Art Literacy, Critical Pedagogy, Communication Through the Arts, Cultural Awareness

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Introduction

In recent decades, the international community has recognised the importance of second language education in maintaining linguistic and cultural diversity (Zhang, 2018). An alternate and inclusive Second Language education plays a significant role in fostering positive emotions, personality traits, and institutional tendencies in learners (Wang, Derakhshan & Zhang, 2021). It involves affective variables like willingness to communicate, influencing individuals' communication in first and second languages (Yashima, 2002). This paper focuses on the potential of the arts as a primary teaching medium and as an additional language that enhances learning across the curriculum. There is ample evidence of art's power as a supplementary teaching means. Professionals in second language teaching have long recognised and utilised art as a dynamic tool for language learning (Alexander et al., 2013; De Jesus, 2016; Mitakidou, 2010; Mitakidou & Tressou, 2017). Martin (2017) argues that "[t]he arts can be used to teach, not just as activities that enhance learning, but also as the primary medium through which students process, acquire, and represent knowledge" (p. 116). Over the last decades, whole-school arts-based implementations have occurred, where schools have shifted from traditional to an interdisciplinary arts-rich curriculum that encourages students to build on their strengths and talents and represent knowledge through diverse modes of expression. Museums and cultural institutions have also developed programmes[1] and provide rich resources for second or foreign language teaching through the arts and cultural artefacts (Yagcioglu, 2022). However, despite these initiatives, the arts remain at the margins of school activity, or as Spina (2006) suggests, they remain a "frill" or "enrichment" and "not as a way of building communication skills or advancing academic achievement" (p. 5). At best, they occasionally support the learning of core school subjects.

Approximately 35 years ago, Gloria Ladson-Billings coined "culturally relevant pedagogy" to describe an educational approach promoting students' academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. This concept involves fostering a sociopolitical awareness that enables students to critically analyse cultural norms, values, and institutions perpetuating social inequalities (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 162). By leveraging students' cultural backgrounds, culturally relevant teaching has proven more equitable and efficacious, offering a meaningful learning platform for all students. It amplifies the voices of marginalised students and provides privileged students with the opportunity to acknowledge and interrogate their privileges. Despite the advancements and the growing awareness among educators regarding the need to cultivate more inclusive and engaging learning environments, Ladson-Billings (2021) recently advocated for a "hard reset" in education, emphasising a more robust and culturally-centered pedagogy (p. 68). This renewed focus on culturally relevant pedagogy aims to empower educators and underscore their pivotal role in shaping the future of education.

Similarly, the idea promoted here is that art is a medium through which students can engage meaningfully in their learning and acquire and demonstrate their knowledge in a socially aware education. Socially aware education, in this context, refers to an approach that prepares students to understand themselves and others intensely, be open to diverse cultures and perspectives, and recognise the power of community and collaborative processes. Research has shown that integrating social awareness into education can enhance student learning

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[1] E.g., https://www.britishmuseum.org/learn/adult-learning/esol
https://eltcampus.com/blog/museum-resources-for-the-english-language-teacher

outcomes, benefiting educational entities and society (Grant, 2019). Ying and Kutty (2023) argue that the developmental stage of children is critical for fostering social awareness skills, which are crucial for developing empathy, cooperation, perspective-taking, positive relationships, and prosocial behaviour. In socially aware education, the arts are increasingly being recognised as a potential second language that can contribute significantly to students' development. Art education is seen as a means to foster social action, democratic participation, and awareness of social issues, thereby contributing to the improvement of collective existence (Belver, Ullán & Acaso, 2005; Darts, 2004).

Summarising the results of relevant research projects, which have been proliferating in the EU over the last fifteen years, it is clear that incorporating the arts into education can enhance communication awareness, language mastery, and second language development, ultimately contributing to social justice in education and sustainable community development (Ioannidou, 2022; Kompiadou, Lenakakis & Tsokalidou, 2017; Leeman, Rabin & Román-Mendoza, 2011; Okan, 2020).

Advantages of Integrating Arts as an Additional Language

Drawing on the processes and outcomes of recent EU-funded projects such as CARE and CARE/SS[2], our research underscores the unique benefits of fully integrating the arts into education, not just as a supplement but as a primary medium. This inspiring approach posits that the arts can serve as a unique language through which students can process, acquire, and represent knowledge, thereby fostering socially aware education.

The role of the arts in education is increasingly recognised as a valuable contributor to students' development. Art education, including visual arts, theatre, music, literature, and other creative practices, has enhanced language awareness, social and cultural understanding, and critical thinking skills, which are cornerstones of academic success (Chen, 2009; Dobrick & Fattal, 2018; Tulasiewicz, 1997). It is seen as a means to foster social action, democratic participation, and awareness of social issues. Integrating the arts holistically into the curriculum creates educational spaces that allow for the exchange of languages, customs and traditions, attitudes and perspectives, promoting human development and mutual coexistence among social groups (Belver et al., 2005). Furthermore, the arts play a crucial role in developing empathy, self-awareness, and collaboration skills among students, essential components of socially aware education (Dobrick & Fattal, 2018). Additionally, the arts can serve as a tool for activism, identity exploration, and heritage language education, emphasising the importance of sociocultural factors in sustainable community living and learning (Peña-Pincheira & Costa, 2020; Robertson & Hughes, 2011).

In the context of arts as a second language education, pre- and in-service generalist teachers are encouraged to engage with critical art literacy and social justice issues, highlighting the importance of preparing students to become critically aware individuals. The expressive and interpretive nature of the arts not only provides a platform for students to engage with critical issues and develop a deeper understanding of societal challenges but also cultivates a sense of social responsibility, a crucial aspect of social development.

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[2] CARE/SS: Critical Arts Education for Sustainable Societies. Erasmus+, KA2 project: Strategic Partnerships for higher education, KA220-HED - Cooperation partnerships in higher education. https://care-ss.frederick.ac.cy/ (2022-2024) and CARE, Visual art education in new times: Connecting Art with REal life issues is an EU-funded Erasmus + project (2019-2022).

Research indicates that integrating social awareness into education significantly improves student learning outcomes. Cultivating social awareness skills in future teachers and through them in children is crucial for fostering empathy, cooperation, and positive relationships. Approaches such as critical inquiry projects and human rights education play a crucial role in promoting social justice awareness in education. After all, as has already been emphasised, culturally relevant pedagogy provides an inclusive learning platform for all students and encourages critical examination of cultural norms and values. However, despite the progress, there is a growing call for a comprehensive and culturally centred pedagogy to catalyse a significant transformation in education.

A brief review of the relevant literature reveals these basic arguments: In a groundbreaking work for its time, Greene (1995) proposed that integrating arts into education is pivotal for transforming learning. This exposure ignites imagination and fosters profound engagement, leading to growth and innovation. Similarly, these days, Halverson and Sawyer (2022) advocate using art practices to enhance cognitive, social, and cultural dimensions of learning. According to Spina (2006), the arts should be regarded as an additional language because they offer a rich semiotic experience, allowing individuals to approach symbolisation creatively and nuancedly. The unique advantage of the arts lies in their ability to facilitate communication through non-verbal means, unconstrained by grammar and language rules. As a non-verbal language, the arts can create a "common meaning" (Bamford & Wimmer, 2012, p. 6) that exploits other perception recall and use mechanisms, making them more inclusive and appealing to students of varying linguistic levels and backgrounds than formal teaching methods. By infusing instruction with creativity and active listening, students can improve their language proficiency and, at the same time, deepen their understanding and appreciation of artistic culture, thereby fostering a more holistic approach to language, the arts and other subjects of the curriculum (Zhang & Jia, 2022). Overall, these perspectives highlight the invaluable role of the arts in education for promoting imagination, innovation, and inclusivity. An authentic arts-based curriculum encourages diverse modes of expression, allowing students to embrace their linguistic and cultural diversity. Such an approach not only enhances their language skills but also fosters their expressive abilities on a global scale, a significant and often overlooked benefit of arts-based learning. Further, it encourages students to explore language within its cultural context, fostering a deeper connection between language usage and cultural understanding (Bloju, 2023).

Art Literacy and Language Learning

Arts activities encourage peer support, providing opportunities for students to explore new thoughts and language areas with the help of others, thereby enhancing the meaning of their actions (Spina, 2006). This framework allows for natural code-switching between languages. Moreover, the knowledge and skills gained through the arts are transferable to other subjects, similar to how language acquisition in one language can benefit learning other languages (Cummins, 2007; Mitakidou, 2003).

The engagement in arts activities facilitates peer scaffolding, offering students valuable chances for gradual exploration into new realms of thought and learning. Fellow students often aid in interpreting actions, transforming their significance for the learner. In this context, code-switching between languages and artistic expression becomes a natural and beneficial choice. This emphasis on peer collaboration underscores the significance of teamwork and cooperation in the learning process.

When comparing the common mechanisms of approach in second language learning through verbal construction and the arts, exciting elements emerge from literature (Martin, 2017) and practical experiences such as the CARE/SS project. It becomes evident that the processes involved in these two fields are parallel. However, the arts significantly trigger the processes, leading to a more universal achievement of social inclusion.

The acquisition of a second verbal language involves familiarisation with the phonology and morphology of the language, interaction and collaboration with proficient speakers of the target language, reflection and self-expression through the use of the language. Similarly, using the arts as a second language entails cultivating an appreciation for the arts, drawing inspiration from them, and reflecting and expressing oneself through them.

Motivation and humour are integral factors in second language acquisition, whether verbal or artistic, as they positively influence individuals' eagerness to gain new knowledge and significantly impact their proficiency and skills. These elements are also fundamental components of socially conscious art education and critical pedagogy.

It is worth mentioning that the fusion of language and concepts is seen more evidently in arts as a second language education. This approach integrates art lessons with the learning of another subject, emphasising meaning over form and the learning process over the final product. Arts as a second language tailors arts lessons to students' existing knowledge and skills, building on their abilities.

In traditional second language learning, language acquisition relies on social interaction, while in arts as a second language education, social interaction, collaboration, discussion, and response are integrated into the learning process. Arts as a second language provides a supportive environment for artistic growth and expression, including adequate time, scaffolding, trust, and respect, essential for second language acquisition.

Moreover, arts as a second language goes beyond language satisfaction and joy, incorporating aesthetic experiences that encourage experimentation, observation, and exploration within the art form. While second language learning emphasises adjusting language for student comprehension, arts as a second language takes a structured approach, focusing on a structured art curriculum to appropriately challenge students based on grade-level expectations. This structured approach reassures educators of its effectiveness in teaching artistic language skills.

Finally, similar to the gradual development of language skills in second verbal language learning, arts as a second language allows for the longitudinal growth of artistic language skills over several years. This long-term approach to learning in arts as a second language education should inspire all involved, especially pedagogy stakeholders, as it promises significant and lasting benefits for students.

An essential prerequisite for authentic arts integration is that the arts are not marginalised but hold equal status with other curriculum subjects. Although many Western educational systems have incorporated the arts into their curricular planning, the interpretation and implementation of this mandate in schools can be problematic, where a lack of consensus around purpose increased accountability focused on a narrow range of subjects, and acute funding issues prevail (Pavlou, 2022; Tambling & Bacon, 2023).

The CARE/SS Project

The European-funded CARE/SS research project was created to provide a platform for students to engage with critical issues, gain a deeper understanding of societal challenges, and develop a sense of social responsibility. It involved the collaboration of five partner universities and was designed for undergraduate and postgraduate student teachers, in-service teachers, and arts education students. The training programmes aimed to promote the well-rounded development of learners and were based on the guide "Socially Engaged Arts Curricula for Teacher Training Programmes" by Vella (2024). The courses incorporated theories such as socially engaged arts, critical pedagogy, sustainable education, arts education, and new technologies. The activities were centred on five major themes: *Public space, Respecting diversity and inclusion, Sharing knowledge, Collaborative processes, and Sustainable transformations in society*.

The Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH) training programme included a postgraduate course for in-service teachers and two courses for future teachers, one in Greek and one in English for Erasmus student teachers. Most undergraduate participants at the School of Education of Aristotle University were already familiar with arts in education, while others had varying degrees of previous arts-based experience. All three courses provided extensive documentation of the potential of art as an additional language to support students' learning across the curriculum.

The programme was designed to present theory through artistic practices and new technologies. The courses utilised an experiential, participatory approach, encouraging collaboration and interaction to support students and empower them to use the arts as an expressive means. This expanded the possible associations that linguistic interactions allow (Spina, 2006). The arts functioned as a dynamic additional language, allowing participants to understand the course's theoretical background, gain an increased appreciation of the arts, overcome any fear of engaging with the arts, and feel confident expressing themselves through the arts. By immersing trainees in artistic practices and cultural traditions, trainers created a more stimulating and meaningful holistic learning environment that promoted both linguistic proficiency and cultural awareness. In the realm of intercultural communication, visual arts played a crucial role in bridging cultural gaps and promoting cross-cultural understanding. Visual communication through iconic artistic examples from the international artistic sphere was used to convey messages and shape perceptions, demonstrating the diverse nature of visual arts. Additionally, the integration of visual communication design and public art in the digital era has broadened the opportunities for interactive exercises, surpassing traditional methods of information dissemination. Visual arts, drama interactions and creative writing, for a start, offered great educational potential for the integration of variant, marginalised groups like foreign student teachers (Erasmus) from different cognitive and cultural backgrounds, special needs pre-service future teachers and refugees new students living and trying to get acquainted with the dominant culture, while not abandoning their cultural identity. After all, as has already been emphasised, in socially engaged art education, arts act as a multifaceted language, preserving culture, facilitating communication, and promoting inclusivity by providing a platform for their distinctive expressions (Mills & Doyle, 2019). In role-play and theatre, for example, individuals immerse themselves in different perspectives, thus expanding their awareness of alternative ways of existence. In that context, the scientific team (trainers) established an optional arts-based seminar for the group to delve into their dilemmas and engage in fresh perspective-taking experiences through arts-based and Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 2002) activities. Many students

effectively confronted their assumptions and explored new possibilities through this initiative. Trainers asserted that "engaging in embodied reflections, naming, imagining, and critically reflecting provided a rich opportunity for constructing new ways of thinking and feeling, which could lead to transformative learning" (Bhukhanwala, Dean & Troyer, 2017, p. 611). The outcomes underscored the significance of several elements: A collective challenge commencing with a participant's predicament, fostering a secure environment, displaying vulnerability and learning from encounters, empathetic peer engagement, and the role of the facilitator.

Further, through digital storytelling, students explored diverse cultural landscapes, enhancing their language skills while gaining insights into variant cultural practices and traditions represented in class (Greek and foreign students). Online intercultural exchange using applications like Canva and Padlet or Blogging has also been found to be instrumental in developing learners' cultural awareness and understanding of cultural similarities and differences. As Ioannidou (2024) explains, students have deepened their cross-cultural awareness and appreciation by engaging in personal discovery and social interactions with peers from different cultural backgrounds, fostering a more inclusive and empathetic approach to language learning. All these hands-on experiences allowed them to reflect critically on cultural nuances, ultimately enhancing their intercultural competence and communication skills in a more effective, engaging way that promoted active social inclusion through critical, socially engaged arts-based pedagogies.

The findings of CARE/SS demonstrate that socially engaged arts play a crucial role in fostering positive community transformation. A thorough observation of the participation tempo and quality, oral and written reflections, artistic creations, and evaluation processes through quantitative and qualitative data analysis confirmed that participants felt sensitised and empowered by the course. Most expressed their commitment to remain alert and responsive to societal challenges. Trainers and trainees have emphasised that socially engaged arts create a safe space for individuals to express themselves and engage in meaningful dialogue. Through various art forms, individuals can reflect on their experiences, communicate their thoughts and feelings, and envision a collective future. Moreover, participants noted that engaging with art stimulates action, facilitates the deconstruction and reconstruction of individual and community identities, and harnesses conflict as a constructive tool for learning and growth. Art is seen as a powerful medium for self-expression, perspective transformation, and processing difficult emotions.

The arts have been recognised as instrumental in facilitating meaning-making, empowerment, self-identity exploration, healing, and personal transformation. This comprehensive understanding of the impact of socially engaged arts underscores their importance as tools for individual and community well-being and development.

Observing participants' gradual growth and meaningful associations with the art, they were exposed to both as audiences and as active participants were rewarding. The training programme created an inclusive, hospitable platform for all students, allowing them to engage meaningfully with the arts and through them with the theoretical background of the course.

Following are some indicative *mot* à *mot* comments from the learners' working groups that provide documentation of the power of arts to act as a second/ alternative language that

scaffolds students' learning across the curriculum, aiding them to develop a deeper understanding of societal challenges and cultivate a sense of social responsibility.

> All forms of art leave a powerful imprint on students: they unsettle and challenge them, and they sensitise, activate, and engage them, thus reinforcing creative collaborations. As a means of expression and interaction, art decisively contributes to eliminating contemporary social plagues. (group 1)

> Through our work, we wanted to demonstrate how important art is in everyone's life and how easily it can contribute to the improvement of not just one space but also society as a whole. (group 2)

> The main idea is to encourage students to build on their creativity to highlight and face inequalities in society. (group 11)

> In implementing our final assignment, we associated with the arts and experientially appreciated the importance of accepting diversity through it. It was a unique process and an excellent practice that we will definitely follow as professionals. (group 13)

Indeed, participants appeared determined to build on their newly acquired knowledge in their practice. Their reflections on their engagement with the training project suggest that their commitment and involvement with the programme goals might be ongoing and have a powerful impact on their professional profile.

> The pervasive anti-democratic spirit of our times, the violation of human rights inside and outside our borders, the escalation of inequalities, and the "normalisation" of racist practices coupled with institutional indifference make education the only means of defending human beings. (group 6)

> We consider that if the particular activity was an unforgettable initiative of social sensitisation and action that promoted our need for creativity and our struggle to improve contemporary reality, it must have the same impact on our young students. (group 16)

Sensitisation was a word echoed in almost all assignments. Most groups of participants realised and pursued through their work the powerful impact the arts afford on people's sensitisation to crucial societal issues.

> Our main goal was to sensitise the children and, through them, the public, which related to the activities related to environmental pollution. The activity could function as a peaceful protest that could reach the local authorities and possibly change deep-rooted attitudes toward bad public space management. (group 3)

> We consider it our duty to sensitise our students to societal challenges as we consider them active citizens and invite them to co-decide the activities appropriate for our school and other public spaces frequented by children. (group 4)

An added benefit was the enhancement of participants' cultural as well as personal and social identity.

> In the final assignment implementation, I discovered aspects of myself I was unaware of. I realised my love for art and its power. Through the arts, we may express ourselves in the most creative way, even the most complex social issue, so nothing is impossible if you find the appropriate way to express it. (group 4)

> Through artistic expression, people understand the world but also themselves better; they realise the problems and pathogenies of the society they inhabit and enter a process of exploration and reflection. (group 4)

> Gradually, we realised that the fear of the unknown we felt is socially constructed: we can achieve whatever we long for, despite our faults and weaknesses, provided we simply accept to try alternative routes. (group 7)

Coupled with their growth in and empowerment through the arts was participants' liberation from their arts' fear.

> The activities of the course, as well as the process of implementing our final assignment, helped me realise the "magic" of art: You do not have to have talent in order to create. All you need is the proper disposition and collaboration so that you can unite differences into a voice that will carry and defend your message. (group 7)

The overwhelming majority of participants cherished the inviting, inclusive atmosphere created through the arts.

> The creation of an inclusive culture is achieved through the empowerment of the team, the sense of belonging, the common goal, the acceptance of diversity and the development of a school for all children. Inclusive practices need to aim at increased participation of all children and decrease exclusions. (group 7)

> Art constitutes the ideal vehicle for expressing with means that suit us and construct public contexts that we are happy to inhabit. (group 8)

Also, participants put their trust in the language of the arts to carry their messages for the pressing need for sustainable transformations in society.

> Our project is not merely about highlighting the problem; it is rooted in a call to action and a belief in the simplicity of the solution. Changing a few habits and attitudes can pave the way for a significant positive impact. (Erasmus group)

Finally, they appear fully aware of the need for strong alliances and informed and committed communities in the cause of change.

> By encouraging people to act collectively and fostering a sense of closeness, we aim to instil a genuine commitment to the well-being of our shared environment. Creating a strong community bond catalyses individuals to feel a sense of agency and responsibility, thereby propelling them to adopt sustainable practices. (Erasmus group)

Conclusion

Arts serve as a powerful alternative language of communication, offering a creative and imaginative platform that goes beyond ordinary forms of expression. This mode of communication is particularly valuable in educational settings, as it can enhance learner involvement and motivation and contribute to societal development and progress (Donahue & Stuart, 2024).

Research and the findings of programmes such as CARE/SS demonstrate evidently that through their expressive and interpretive nature, the arts provide a platform for learners to engage with critical issues, develop a deeper understanding of societal challenges, and cultivate a sense of social responsibility. The arts are indeed emerging as a potential second language in socially aware education, offering students a unique avenue to develop language skills, cultural awareness, critical thinking abilities, and a sense of social justice. By integrating the arts into educational practices, educators can create inclusive and dynamic learning environments that foster creativity, empathy, and a deeper understanding of the world around them. Socially aware education through the arts is essential for nurturing well-rounded individuals who are academically proficient, socially conscious, and empathetic. The more arts are blended into real-life, sustainable education, the more students can develop critical thinking skills, empathy, and a sense of social responsibility, contributing to a more inclusive and harmonious society.

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