

ART AS A TOOL FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING

The foreign language class is the perfect place to bring together subjects and make connections. The target language is not the primary goal of the study but becomes the medium needed to reach and handle the information. It is important that the visual should at all times be one of the elements at play.

In the following activity, students produce art work as a response to a text in French and write a description in French as a response to an intriguing painting. They also demonstrate their understanding of a surrealist painting by adapting its concept to a depiction of their own bedroom and subsequently write a matching description of it in French. This activity includes research with a partner, an oral presentation in French to the class, and a close observation of two very different famous paintings, namely Van Gogh's *Bedroom at Arles* and Magritte's *Personal Values*.

Stage One: Creating artwork as a response to a description

After learning or reviewing vocabulary about common household objects and furniture as well as prepositions (*à droite, à gauche, sur, sous, au dessus de, près de*), the teacher gives the students a copy of the following text, *La Chambre mystérieuse*. The text should be read and questions asked to ensure global comprehension by the students.

Here is a timely opportunity to review the agreements between nouns and adjectives and to introduce the rule that stipulates the non-agreement of adjectives followed by another adjective, for example *bleu foncé, vert clair, jaune pâle, rose vif*.

The assignment consists of drawing the bedroom very precisely, according to the description given, and following carefully the positioning of the objects in the room. All objects have to be neatly labeled in French. The drawing should be done on quality paper and colored according to the directions in the description.

This exercise will gain by the diversity of the outcome, and it is preferable if students are assigned this illustration as homework so they cannot influence each other. Reassure your less artistic students and tell them that as long as they follow the description, they will do well on this assignment.

Description d'une chambre mystérieuse

C'est une chambre très simple et campagnarde. Il y a une fenêtre verte au fond de la chambre. À droite, il y a un lit à une personne en bois blond avec deux oreillers jaune clair et une couverture rouge. Sur le mur à droite du lit, il y a quatre tableaux. Deux d'entre eux représentent des portraits de jeunes hommes. Ils sont accrochés plus haut que les deux autres. Les deux tableaux inférieurs sont rectangulaires. Les murs sont bleu clair et les portes bleu vif. Le sol est en bois irrégulier marron clair.

Au fond, à gauche de la fenêtre, c'est probablement le coin toilette, en quelque sorte une salle de bain à l'ancienne. Un miroir rectangulaire y est accroché. Devant ce miroir se trouve une petite table carrée. Sur cette table, il y a deux petites bouteilles en verre, deux brosses, un pichet en céramique bleu, un verre et du savon dans une petite assiette.

À droite de la fenêtre et derrière la tête de lit, on aperçoit des vêtements bleus et verts et un chapeau de paille sur des porte-manteaux. Au-dessus du porte-manteau, il y a un tableau qui représente un paysage avec un arbre et la campagne. À droite de la table, il y a une chaise en bois et en paille. Il y a une autre chaise semblable à gauche de la pièce, près d'une porte bleue. C'est une chambre pauvre, mais en ordre, ensoleillée et agréable.

Exhibit all drawings together on a bulletin board in the classroom. Reread the description and check with the students that all details of the description are included in each drawing.

Initiate a discussion about what kind of person could be living in the bedroom and where this room might be located (country setting, humble furniture, basic utilitarian objects, sunshine, straw hat, paintings on the wall...).

At this point, tell students that this is actually the description of a very famous painting, and ask if they can guess which one.

Provide a large-size poster of Van Gogh's *The Artist's Room at Arles* and add it to the bulletin board in the midst of their

drawings. The students will spontaneously compare their version to the original by Van Gogh, and the variety of the drawings will be amusing and very entertaining, besides being decorative for the classroom. Give the title of the painting to your students in French: *Chambre de Vincent Van Gogh à Arles*. What do they already know about the artist?

If you choose to stretch the art history side of this activity, here is a list of questions that students should find an answer to at the library. Pair the students and turn this research into a treasure hunt. Of course, it would also be appropriate to use the Internet or CD-ROMs to find the answers to these questions, but books are still a reliable resource:

- Quelle était la nationalité de Van Gogh?*
- Combien de temps a-t-il habité en France?*
- Quel était son prénom?*
- Quelle était son occupation?*
- En quelle année est-il né? Quelle est la date de sa mort?*
- Quel âge avait-il à sa mort?*
- Comment est-il mort?*
- Quelles sont ses œuvres les plus connues?*
- Où se trouve Arles? Dans quelle région?*
- Quel est le climat de cette région?*
- Combien de temps Van Gogh a-t-il passé en France?*
- Comment s'appelait son frère et quelle était sa profession?*

This type of exercise is adaptable for any painting or picture, as long as the teacher adapts the description to the level of the students and to the prescribed vocabulary and grammar.

It might be interesting to know that Van Gogh painted the first version of this scene in October 1888 while he was waiting for his fellow artist Paul Gauguin to join him in Arles in southern France. Many of the objects appear in pairs: two chairs, two pillows, two waterjugs, and two bottles. The pairing can be seen as Van Gogh's never-fulfilled wish of partnership and friendship.

Stage Two: From the painting to the description:

Keeping the theme of the bedroom, in this second phase, exhibit a large poster (or an enlarged laminated color photocopy) of Magritte's *Valeurs Personnelles* on the

classroom wall. Magritte is a Belgian surrealist painter. Magritte's art is constantly surprising. Incongruous objects are often juxtaposed. This painting might appear odd to students at first, but this will undoubtedly catch the attention of everyone. While all depicted objects are realistic and recognizable, their proportions are not respected. For example, a huge comb is standing on a reduced-size bed and a very large wine glass stands in the middle of the room on a small carpet.

Hand out a photocopy (color preferably) of the painting to each student. In class, under the teacher's guidance, students neatly label every piece of furniture and object depicted on the painting. Here is a list of words that can be introduced.

Valeurs Personnelles de Magritte

<i>l'allumette</i>	<i>le tapis</i>
<i>le peigne</i>	<i>le verre à pied</i>
<i>le nuage</i>	<i>l'armoire</i>
<i>le ciel</i>	<i>le blaireau</i>
<i>le mur</i>	<i>le savon</i>
<i>le pied de lit</i>	<i>le miroir</i>
<i>le plancher</i>	<i>le rideau</i>
<i>la couverture</i>	<i>l'oreiller</i>
<i>la tête de lit</i>	<i>le plafond</i>

Now that the basic vocabulary is known, their assignment is to write a description of the painting by Magritte, using the description of Van Gogh's room as a model. The students are expected to use the vocabulary words, prepositions, colors, and adjectives. A good description should not omit any detail, especially the positioning of objects within the room.

Descriptions are then read by their author in class and compared to the original painting. Corrected descriptions can be exhibited on the bulletin board around the copy of Magritte's *Valeurs Personnelles*.

A treasure hunt could take place at this point in the library, as previously done for Van Gogh, to find answers to the following questions:

- En quelle année est né Magritte?*
- Quel était son prénom ?*
- En quelle année est-il mort et quel âge avait-il? Quelle était sa nationalité?*
- Que signifie "surréalisme"?*
- Connaissez-vous d'autres peintres surréalistes?*

After correcting answers, discuss the title in French, and ask students to imagine the person who lives in this room. Guide students to discover that one possible interpretation of this unrealistic proportion of objects in Magritte's bedroom is that the size of each item is proportioned to the

importance each object has for the person who lives there. In this way, the person, most probably a man because of the shaving brush, cares about his hygiene (the soap) and personal care (the comb). He might also like drinking wine (the glass) and smoking (the match). He likes comfort (the Persian carpets, the wardrobe) and likes things to be neat and tidy (the made bed). He is also prone to dreaming (the clouds on the walls). This is only one possible explanation, and students will come up with their own ideas and impressions. All this should be done in French and could be prompted by such questions as:

Qu'est-ce qui est important pour la personne qui habite cette chambre? Est-ce un homme ou une femme?

Quels sont les objets les plus grands? Quels sont les plus petits?

Faites une liste des objets par ordre de grandeur, du plus grand au plus petit. (Si nécessaire, mesurez les objets sur le poster de la classe.)

Pourquoi est-ce que les murs représentent un ciel bleu avec des nuages?

Aimeriez-vous vivre dans cette chambre? Pourquoi? Pourquoi pas?

After this activity, tell students they will be quizzed on the vocabulary related to bedrooms during the following class. I usually make photocopies of one of the two paintings studied so far and ask the students to label as many objects as they can. This quiz is part of the overall assessment of this unit, as explained below.

Stage Three: Magritte's concept of disproportion

Using Magritte's approach to representing reality by freely adapting the size of objects to their relative importance to a person, students are assigned the following exercise: they are to draw their own bedroom in a realistic manner, while exaggerating the size of objects, showing what is important to them. The drawings will be made on quality paper, all objects will be labeled in French, and the title of the drawing will be *Mes Valeurs personnelles*. Some of my students sign their work with their first name followed by the last name Magritte, so we have drawings by Ashley Magritte, Andrew Magritte, Kristen Magritte, etc.

Once again, the variety of the outcome is wonderful, and students are able to express very personal likes, dislikes, and feelings.

The students are asked to present their drawings to the class, explaining in French what is important to them (the labeled objects will ease this process). This gives students a chance to express something very personal, which is always a favorite exercise, even though it is in French.

The final assignment is for the students to describe the drawing of their bedroom in writing, reusing previous vocabulary and descriptions. The corrected descriptions will be paired with their respective drawings, and these masterpieces will be proudly exhibited on the bulletin board, in the vicinity of Magritte's own painting.

At the end of this three-fold activity, students have gained a good knowledge of two famous paintings. They have mastered vocabulary, prepositions, colors, adjectives. They also have produced artwork as a response to a description in French and have written descriptions in French. They have done some research with a partner, and they have expressed themselves in front of the class. As the crowning of this whole unit, the walls of your classroom exhibit colorful and interesting art works by your proud students.

This activity can be assessed in its different parts as follows:

Drawing of the mysterious bedroom (Van Gogh's *Bedroom at Arles*):

Accuracy of drawing from description	10 points
Accurate labeling of objects in French	5 points
Artistic quality of drawing or effort	5 points
Research on Van Gogh	5 points

Magritte's painting *Valeurs Personnelles*:

Description of bedroom in French	15 points
Participation in discussion on personality of owner	5 points
Research on Magritte	5 points
Quiz on bedroom vocabulary based on copies of paintings	10 points

Student's own bedroom:

Accurate labeling of objects	5 points
Adaptation of Magritte's style using disproportion	10 points
Presentation to the class in French	10 points
Written description of student's own bedroom	15 points

Total **100 points**

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